

2005 Samstag essay

Art in an Age of Anxiety

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In the 1980s, the Russian-born American artists Komar and Melamid held an exhibition in an upmarket Manhattan gallery which included a pair of tongue-in-cheek portraits, one of Hitler and one of Stalin, both painted in classic Socialist Realist style and more or less identical. A disgruntled member of the public protested at this glibness in the only way he knew how, by slashing the paintings and scrawling a note that read, "I'm fed up with irony".

One can understand his frustration, perhaps, but was he being naive as well as destructive? What else but irony is possible? (Actually, the story is so good that one wonders if the artists themselves did the slashing in an effort to compound the ironies.)

Ever since Theodor Adorno proclaimed in 1949 that the Holocaust had rendered poetry impossible, poets and artists have worried about what art can do. As Humphrey McQueen puts it, 'the eternal recurrence of Adorno's remark registers a fear that art has been rendered mute. Or has it been reduced to absurdism and abstraction?'¹

These are not new questions, of course. Philosophers have been worrying for centuries about art's role in relation to the social, moral and political order. The difference today is that we must ask them in an ethical vacuum. We have no founding principles on which to base our responses: the moral order, at least, has gone. Irony is, perhaps, our last resort, a way of stepping back into a protected zone in order to avoid such difficulties altogether.

A certain amount of anxiety about art's social, moral and political purpose underlies the works in this year's Samstag selection, without ever actually coming to the fore. Firstly, it is interesting to note that none of these works is overtly political. Despite references to such issues as medical technologies, feminist theory and the problems of modernist architecture, they could hardly be called rallying cries. If that represents a retreat, then it's a retreat into reality, for (as Komar and Melamid may have been trying to point out) art is not a very good vehicle for social or political protest. Art changes nothing, as Auden said, rather too pessimistically.

Nevertheless, although they eschew polemic, all these works have a strongly materialist emphasis. They are about concrete things in the here and now, things that are most likely to be of immediate concern to a relatively affluent, self-aware, urban middle-class. True to the theory that underpins them, this kind of art seeks to problematise what might otherwise be thought unproblematic. So, together, these works present a picture of the urban middle classes as undergoing some sort of identity crisis, a crisis, it would appear, that has its roots in our fraught, love-hate relationship with modern technologies.

These artists use sophisticated modern electronic equipment or synthetic materials such as plastics and polymers. They tend to favour industrial techniques such as laser-cutting and computerisation. Furthermore, they cite their engagement with new technologies as being, in itself, an important element of their work. All live in urban centres and all have expressed a desire to use their scholarship money to study in bigger urban centres overseas. Unsurprisingly, then, the natural environment is notable by its absence.

Nor do these artists appear to be very closely engaged with human nature. Their major interests are abstract and social rather than personal: what we might call broad concerns, rather than intimate ones. There is little hint here of the metaphysical: of the pain of love or bereavement, the ache of loss, melancholy, or even joy: certainly nothing of the intensity of *weltschmerz*. Indeed, there is something quite disconcerting about the confidence and insouciance suggested by these diverse works.

This is not to say that they are coldly unengaged. In fact, a couple of quite Romantic ideas lurk just beneath their apparently inscrutable surfaces. One is the archetypal Romantic notion of unity, integration and complexity. **Mikala Dwyer**, for example, tries to imagine a merging of perceiver with the perceived environment so as to blur the distinction between the subjective and objective worlds. She is interested in the ways our environments change our consciousness.

Michael Graeve revives the age-old quest for links between painting and music, in order, as he says, 'to extend the frameworks for their creation and reading'.²

And **Edward Wright**, through his novel '*Chinese whispers*' painting project, says that 'doubling, tripling, even quadrupling the images (not with copies but new originals) may add power through reinforcement, and an eccentric note as the memory of one image is spliced with others. All the solo exhibitions', he adds with a flourish, 'will add up to the one meta-work. Not a juxtaposition of works, but a continuum through which meaning evolves.' What could be more Romantic than that?

Along with unity and assimilation comes a corresponding interest in movement and change, which, as we've seen, Mikala Dwyer's constructions demonstrate quite clearly. Today, our anxieties about how we relate to the largely artificial, human-made environments most of us find ourselves living in are a natural outcome (or should that be 'a precursor') of worries about who we are. 'Identity' is a characteristically modern Western obsession.

Jemima Wyman views it through the distorting lens of Hollywood, which thrives on the invention and confusion of identities. If you want to explore the confusion between fiction and reality, there can be no better place to start. Much of

that confusion stems from our loss of those literary and theatrical conventions that once applied to fiction, and our insistence that movies and television programs should be as 'real' as possible. Breaking down barriers and blurring distinctions doesn't always have desirable consequences.

In any case, the works of this year's six Samstag scholars would suggest that everything is in flux, everything's up for reinterpretation or realignment - including one's own identity - nothing is fixed or sure (which is also a characteristically urban point of view). Much the same message is provided each evening by the SBS World News, of course, although in that case it's played out on a much bigger canvas and is a good deal scarier. In the affluent cities of the Western World, we are condemned to living out our lives as voyeurs, aware of horrors we can have no real appreciation of and against which we feel powerless to protest. That may, indeed, cause confusion about what's real and what isn't, although I think we tend to exaggerate it, giving too little credit for people's ability to adapt.

Irony precludes passionate commitment. Irony requires distance, even a certain amount of disdain. It is, by its nature, arch and even a little decadent. And much of the irony we detect in these works is directed at the art of the recent past. Whatever else they might be about, the installations of Dwyer, Graeve, Kutschbach and Marksjo, Wright's 'chain-painting' performance and Wyman's videos are most of all about art itself. This is the way art has always worked, by being to a greater or lesser extent a commentary on the art that preceded it.

The great shadow of Modernism casts itself across all these works, as it casts itself over everything else. It is quite inescapable. Here, the phenomenon of Modernism is both revered - as is evident in the artists' use of materials, tools and techniques that carry an aura of sleek modernity - and decried - as, for example, in Mikala Dwyer's belief that Modernism did not allow for subjectivism or idiosyncrasy, **Viveka Marksjo's** observation that high-tech medicine tends to ignore personal feelings or Edward Wright's implication that Modernist art restricted the potential for give-and-take between artists and their audiences.

Whether or not we can agree with these contentions, or even accept them at face value, will depend on what we perceive Modernism to be (or 'to have been'). Mikala Dwyer conflates Modernism with minimalism and reduction, **Michael Kutschbach** sees it as essentially a design and architecture style, Viveka Marksjo associates Modernism with the alienating effects of technology and Jemima Wyman with a disruption between the corporeal body and the spaces it occupies. Modernism is (or was) a hydra-headed monster and these artists, like most of those who set out to escape it, end up by paying it homage. It is, after all, the only reference point we have, for better or for worse, and we construct Modernism in a multitude of ways, each according to our own needs. One thing we assume all the artists will agree upon, however, is that certain institutions of Modernism - namely the art school and the public art gallery - are in good form and are worth preserving.

Through the good graces of the late Anne and Gordon Samstag, these six artists are being offered a rare and exceptional privilege. Most, I take it, have some overseas experience already, but a year's study at an English, European or American art school will be demanding all the same. Primarily, it will allow for an extended period of reflection and study, and perhaps some opportunities to exhibit. Jonathan Holmes, from the Tasmanian School of Art, recently surveyed a group of Australian artists who had completed Australia Council residencies overseas. Although the majority of them did not succeed in forming long-term professional relationships with overseas galleries, 'the number of artists who went on to have solo exhibitions and to be represented in survey exhibitions back in Australia is quite staggering and, of the artists I interviewed, a large number said that this was a direct result of their period of residency.'³

We can assume that this will be the case for Samstag scholars as well and I'd be surprised if they did not look back on this experience as being a major turning point in their careers.

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1. Humphrey McQueen, 'Thou shalt (not) make graven images', in *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2004, pp. 3-5.

2. Quotations from the artists are from statements on their Samstag application forms.

3. Unpublished letter to the writer, July 28, 2004.

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